

Constance Wu Put Mental Health In Asian Communities In The Spotlight. Here's What's Next.

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This article contains references to suicide and self-harm.

When Taiwanese American actress [Constance Wu](#) tweeted in May 2019 about not wanting to continue working on another season of [Fresh Off The Boat](#), she [received massive backlash](#). At the time, the actress had played matriarch Jessica Huang for five seasons on the hit ABC show. There were comments on Twitter talking about how “ungrateful” Wu was for not being happy while getting paid very well to work on a big television show representing Asian Americans. Many of the attacks came from other members of the Asian diaspora community. Wu would later reveal that a fellow Asian actress DM'd her, telling her she was a [“disgrace” to her race](#) for complaining publicly. (Wu has since deleted her Twitter account.)

Two years after her tweets, having taken a step back from social media and the public eye, Wu publicly shared that she had attempted suicide, tweeting: “I started feeling like I didn't even deserve to live anymore, that I was a disgrace to AsAms (Asian Americans), and they'd be better off without me. Looking back, it's surreal that a few DMs convinced me to [try to] end my own life, but that's what happened.” Last October, Wu published her memoir, [Making a Scene](#), which details the poor treatment she has received as an Asian American woman in Hollywood and the impact it has had on her mental health.

Along with Wu publicly sharing her struggles, the past several years have seen other high profile Asian diaspora members become vocal about their own mental health. Musician and memoirist Michelle Zauner explored grief after the death of her mother in her 2021 *New York Times* bestseller [Crying in Hmart](#). In an October 2022 interview, director and *White Lotus* star Will Sharpe openly discussed his [Type 2 Bipolar Disorder](#). And this month, the White House is hosting the inaugural [White House Forum](#) on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders that will include a breakout convening session to figure out how to take care of the unique mental health needs of Asian American communities.

A 2019 report from the United States Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health found that Asian American women between the ages of 15 and 24 were [more likely to commit suicide](#) than white non-Hispanic women of the same age. Out of the 17,000 Asian Americans surveyed in this report who have had a major depressive episode, roughly half received professional help, as compared to over 70% of their white non-Hispanic counterparts.

Though Constance Wu's transparency about her mental health has opened up a conversation around the pressures of being an Asian American woman, there's still a long way to go in terms of people of Asian diasporas getting the help they need to ensure their mental well being. And, we need to be talking about it.

Writer and director [Huy Vo](#) disagrees with what happened to Wu and the behavior of the Asian community towards her after her tweets about *Fresh Off The Boat's* renewal. "Constance is not a monolith for Asian people. The show *Fresh Off The Boat* is not a monolith for Asian culture. I don't think her actions hurt Asian Americans at all," Vo, the creator of [Patriot Nails](#), a series about an Asian American man who discovers fame before discovering himself and his intergenerational trauma, tells Refinery29. Instead, as Vo notes, it's important to remember that Wu was allegedly sexually harassed by a producer on *Fresh Off the Boat* while working on the show, which she shared in an October 2022 episode of [Red Table Talk](#) with Jada Pinkett Smith. "Constance and all professionals in entertainment are allowed to treat TV and film as work because it is work. That means Asian representation is important, but no one should be giving up their safety for it. No one should be hurt, physically or mentally, for a TV show or film," Vo says.

And, if they are hurt mentally, they should be able to talk about it. But the fact remains that for many AAPI people, the topic of mental health, specifically their own, can be difficult to broach or even acknowledge — which is how it's historically been, for a very valid reason. For many immigrant and refugee Asian American and Asian diaspora families, physical survival and putting food on the table was and is more important than [seeking proper mental health care](#). "Many first-generation Asian immigrants have been so focused on survival that there's no room for anything else, like emotions," psychotherapist Kaila S Tang told [The Guardian](#) in a February 2023 article.

It's a familiar scenario we see play out in popular culture, too. In episode two of the Netflix show [Beef](#), which chronicles the relationship between Amy Lau (Ali Wong) and Danny Cho (Steven Yeun), who spiral out of control after a road rage incident. In the show, Amy talks to an Asian American woman therapist about her childhood. "Talking about your feelings is like complaining. Growing up with my parents taught me to repress my feelings," Amy says. Danny reinforces this idea later in the series, saying, "Asian parents just piss that trauma down."

This idea that voicing emotions is a type of complaining is partly due to the "[model minority](#)" myth: the long-held idea that Asian Americans are hard working, keep their heads down, and are compliant without complaining. While the [model minority myth is harmful](#) to Asian Americans and other racial groups, it also may explain why members of the Asian diaspora are often hush-hush when it comes to talking openly about their own mental health. There's the misconception that in order to advance financially survive in a system that has historically been against them, AAPI people must be cooperative and keep quiet in order to not rock the boat and be acceptable to the white gaze.

For [Jacqueline Thanh](#) (MSW, ABD), a New Orleans-based Chinese-Vietnamese American clinically trained trauma therapist, this is a problem. According to Thanh, this history of suffering

in silence can have a negative and even life threatening impact. “Not reaching out and seeking mental health assistance leads to more depression and anxiety,” Thanh says.

The model minority myth, Thanh notes, paints AAPI people as never in need of assistance. But ultimately, this is detrimental, contributing to the incorrect assumption that AAPI people aren't in need of support. “How are magically intelligent, hard working, self reliant, docile, submissive people, nonetheless women, ever supposed to ask for help when no one ever thinks that we would possibly need help?” Thanh asks.

“It isn't so much that Asian Americans aren't perceived as “angry,” it's like we're not even *allowed* to be angry,” [Phil Yu](#), Korean American creator of the long-running, popular and award winning website [Angry Asian Man](#), tells Refinery29. “We're supposed to just suck it up and quietly shoulder whatever hardship, struggle or slight that gets flung our way.”

This abuse can be even more detrimental when it comes from members of our own communities. In her book, Wu shares her experience of being [verbally and physically harassed](#) by an Asian producer on the set of *Fresh Off The Boat*. Wu alleges that the producer in question placed his hand on her crotch. When Wu disclosed this alleged abuse to an Asian American advocate, instead of support, she said they [praised Wu's abuser](#). The incidents left Wu with “[repressed hurt](#).” What happened to the actress is not an isolated incident, which is why it's more important than ever to be having these conversations around mental health openly — and with people who can understand your lived experience.

As a biracial woman, [Youngmi Mayer](#), the founder and co-host of the [Feeling Asian](#) podcast, grew up in Asia before moving to the United States at age 20. She launched the podcast three years ago to provide a space for her and her co-host to talk about their feelings, and that of their guests from various Asian diasporas. The podcast has brought on practicing therapists more than once.

During their June 16, 2021 episode called [“Asian Seeking Asian \(Therapists\).”](#) the co-hosts had five therapists of Asian diasporas talk about mental health and how tough it can be to find psychologists who understand the issues of the Asian community. On another, they had an open forum with two Asian therapists, [Dr. Peter Adams and Dr. Melissa Yao](#), where listeners were posed with the question: If you had an Asian therapist what would you ask them? “More Asians talking to other Asians or sharing their perspectives on mental health is such an untapped resource,” Dr. Adams said during the episode. It's a reality Mayer has found since the podcast's launch. “Because of the podcast, hundreds of Asian women reached out to me via direct message and told me their stories and basically what I realized is that no one is listening to them and they feel like they can't say stuff like we do on the air,” she says. “They are suffering alone.”

And it's important to remember that it's not “one size fits all” when it comes to mental health needs for members of the community. Our lived experience is completely different as individuals even if we are of the same race and gender identity — or even if you have a white dad and

Korean mom and tattoos like another woman. “It doesn’t matter if your story on paper looks like Michelle Zauner’s,” Mayer says. “Be inspired, share your stories, have your own voice.” “Constance Wu’s story is one story,” Thanh reminds us. “Openly discussing suicidal ideation and suicide is necessary in removing shame. Representation isn’t about perfection or a single lens story. Representation is about plentitude and often profoundly beautiful and brutal truths.” For Thanh, the next steps for members of the [AAPI community](#) involve looking back in order to move forward. “I don’t believe Western therapy works on Eastern minds, but I do believe Eastern therapies have been co-opted by capitalism so that we have forgotten we have community medicine,” she says. “Our sovereignty and power as a diaspora is inextricably linked to our healing... We need to alchemize ancestral rage and decolonize our imperialism.” For all the pain and anger our ancestors felt when their homelands were seized and ravaged by others, causing many Asians to flee and resettle in the West, we must acknowledge this and channel it into things like creative pursuits. Thanh puts it plainly: “We need to sit with our pain and actually grieve in order to heal.”

Vo, who explores generational trauma through his work like *Patriot Nails*, is one of the fortunate ones in that he’s received mental health care from fellow Vietnamese Americans. “I think [about] my experience with mental health services in Kentucky and in California. I used to believe that mental health care was this blanket process that can provide relief to everyone, but then I had a couple Vietnamese American providers in Los Angeles [and] I learned that those shared experiences informed and benefited the way I receive care,” Vo says. “Having more AAPI individuals in health care helps bridge a gap for issues unique to the Asian American experience.”

Angry Asian Man creator Phil Yu has some final advice for members of the AAPI community: “Whatever you do, don’t just sit there and suffer in silence.”

If you or someone you know is considering self-harm, please get help. Call the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) at 1-800-273-8255.